

Syria: Extremism & Counter-Extremism

On May 26, 2020, the United States, aided by Iraq’s intelligence and counterterrorism services, launched an air strike in Deir Ez Zor province, eastern Syria. The strike killed ISIS senior leader, Moataz Al-Jabouri—also known as Hajji Tayseer—who Iraq’s intelligence agency alleges was also known as the “governor of Iraq and head of ISIS’s foreign operations.” Al-Jabouri oversaw ISIS’s state-building efforts and was responsible for planning and coordinating foreign operations. (Source: [The National](#) [1])

On May 25, 2020, U.S. military commanders claimed that more than 10,000 captured ISIS fighters in Kurdish-run wartime prisons now pose a “significant risk” to U.S. troops stationed in the northeast. Within the last two months, two different riots—one on March 29 and one in early May—erupted at Hasaka, the largest of the makeshift detention centers. Although Kurdish officials and members of the American-led coalition were able to negotiate with the militants and bring the rioting under control, potential breakouts demonstrate the high-impact risk ISIS fighters continue to pose for counter-terrorism officials and Syrian civilians. (Source: [New York Times](#) [2])

On January 5, 2020, the U.S.-led military coalition fighting ISIS announced that it would temporarily halt its counter-ISIS missions to focus on protecting Iraqi bases from Iranian-backed militias. Following the death of [Qasem Soleimani](#) [3], leader of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp’s Quds Force (IRGC-QF), on January 2, 2020 by a U.S. drone strike, Major General Hossein Dehghan, the military adviser to Iran’s Supreme leader, stated that Tehran’s response will “for sure be military.” Dehghan further claimed that Iran would retaliate directly against U.S. “military sites.” However, on January 25, 2020, U.S. troops picked up the pace of counterterrorism missions in Syria. General Frank McKenzie, the U.S. Middle East commander, has stated that it is uncertain how long American troops will remain in Syria, but maintains that American forces will stay long enough to weaken ISIS while also providing the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) with enough mentorship and training to become an enduring domestic security unit before U.S. withdrawal. (Sources: [Al Jazeera](#) [4], [Reuters](#) [5], [CNN](#) [6], [New York Times](#) [7], [CNN](#) [8], [Washington Post](#) [9], [Military.Com](#) [10])

The Trump administration has been less than consistent when it comes to whether American troops will withdraw or remain in Syria. On November 25, 2019, it was announced that U.S. troops resumed large-scale counterterrorism missions against ISIS in northern Syria. The announcement came almost two months after U.S. President Donald Trump’s abrupt order to withdraw American troops from northeastern Syria. American-backed operations against ISIS fighters in the area had effectively ground to a halt despite warnings from intelligence analysts that ISIS militants were regrouping and still posed a threat even after their leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was killed during an American raid on October 26, 2019. However, ISIS released a recording on October 30th where the new ISIS spokesman, Abu Hamza al-Quraishi, announced ISIS’s new leader, [Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Quraishi](#) [11]. (Sources: [New York Times](#) [12], [Wall Street Journal](#) [13], [Wall Street Journal](#) [14], [Washington Post](#) [15], [Military Times](#) [16], [New York Times](#) [17])

Overview

The present conflict in Syria can be traced back to the historical tension between Shiite and Sunni groups fueled by the last four decades of the Assad family’s rule and the establishment of the Arab Socialist Baath Party in 1947. Prior to 2011, the Alawite Assad family had maintained political power in Syria for over four decades despite being a minority representation of the overall population. This dynamic between a ruling Shia minority and a disenfranchised Sunni majority would prove to be a source of much political tension within Syria eventually leading to the 2011 uprisings. On April 21, 2011, President Bashar al-Assad ended Syria’s state of emergency which had been in effect for nearly 50 years. Syria’s emergency law was put into effect when the Baath Party came to power in a military coup in 1963. The law gave the government nearly unlimited authority to restrict individual freedoms and to investigate and detain suspects when national security and public safety were deemed to be at risk. The abolition of emergency rule served as an attempt to placate mass protests against Assad’s rule. However, opposition supporters continued to mobilize, taking up arms to defend themselves while also protecting themselves from increasing armed responses from the country’s security forces. Violent altercations rapidly escalated and continued, launching Syria’s ongoing civil war. (Sources: [Counter Terrorism Ethics](#) [18], [Encyclopedia Britannica](#) [19], [Reuters](#) [20], [BBC News](#) [21])

The social, political, and economic conditions under which civil war erupted served to be a hospitable environment for jihadist militancy. However, Sunni extremism has had a long history in the country. For many years prior to 2011, the Assad regime had maintained a consistently amiable relationship with Sunni jihadists. During the U.S.-led occupation of

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Iraq from 2003 to 2010, the Syrian government allowed extremists and foreign fighters to use Syria as a transit point into Iraq to undermine U.S. forces. Additionally, Syria's regime-appointed grand mufti, Sheikh Ahmad Kuftaro, issued a nationwide fatwa that made it religiously obligatory for all Syrians to resist foreign forces through all means necessary, including suicide bombings. (Source: [Foreign Affairs](#) [22], [Chatham House](#) [23])

By 2013, remnants of al-Qaeda in Iraq had rebranded themselves the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and had identified promising recruitment opportunities in Syria, which was in the third year of its civil war. ISIS leader, [Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi](#) [24], an Iraqi, was the leader of the group's push to seize territory and declare its own state. Shortly after the failure of several U.N.-mediated peace talks in early 2014, the prevalence of ISIS in the Syrian conflict became increasingly prominent as the terrorist group launched an aggressive social media campaign involving videos depicting the enactment of gruesome atrocities consistent with sharia law. In January 2014, the city of Raqqa completely fell to ISIS's control and by the end of June 2014, ISIS and Baghdadi declared the official establishment of the Islamic "caliphate." This announcement caused an influx of thousands of foreign fighters into Syria to join under ISIS's banner. In September 2014, the United States and five Arab countries launched air strikes against ISIS in Raqqa and Aleppo. (Sources: [New York Times](#) [25], [Counter Terrorism Ethics](#) [18])

As of February 2020, the Syrian conflict has yet to improve. Despite the territorial defeat of ISIS, a number of jihadist groups have continued to inflict violence among the population on a daily basis. The terrorist groups with an active presence are Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), National Liberation Front, Hurras al-Din (an HTS offshoot), the People's Protection Units (YPG), Failaq al-Rahman, Jaish al-Islam, Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, and Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya. HTS is the latest incarnation of the [Nusra Front](#) [26], which was al-Qaeda's official affiliate in Syria. The group is well-equipped and is one of the strongest militant groups in northern Syria. HTS's offshoot, Hurras al-Din, also maintains a presence in the area. The other significant force is the Turkish-backed National Liberation Front (NLF), which was formed in 2018 by rebel factions wanting to counter HTS. The NLF is an alliance that includes Ahrar al-Sham, a hardline Islamist group, as well as other groups that serve under the umbrella of the "moderate" Free Syrian Army. In 2019, NLF lost most of the area under its control in northern Syria to HTS after fighting broke out between the two groups. NLF reached an agreement recognizing the HTS-backed administration, and since then the two groups have been fighting together against recent Syrian government assaults. (Sources: [BBC News](#) [27], [United States Institute of Peace](#) [28])

On October 13, 2019, U.S. President Donald Trump ordered the withdrawal of American troops from northern Syria—leaving Kurdish forces, who largely control northeastern Syria, vulnerable to attacks from their better equipped Turkish opposition. The Turkish government considers their Kurdish adversaries of the People's Protection Units (YPG) to be an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)—an internationally designated terrorist group. Inciting further conflict, Turkey has been accused of seeking to expand its control throughout northern Syria which has provoked clashes between Kurdish and Assad regime forces and Turkish-backed Arab militias. The death of Baghdadi on October 26, 2019, may have been a setback for ISIS, but given the decentralized infrastructure of the organization, militant actors continue to inflict violence throughout the country. Furthermore, more than 10,000 ISIS fighters are currently being guarded by Kurdish forces in a series of makeshift prisons. These prisons are not heavily secured, and have been prone to prison breaks initiated by former ISIS members. Additionally, there has been growing concern that ISIS members have taken on a prominent presence throughout refugee camps and are heavily recruiting among those spaces. (Sources: [New York Times](#) [29], [United States Institute of Peace](#) [28])

Radicalization and Foreign Fighters

Although multiple extremist organizations operate throughout Syria, ISIS had the largest presence among them, attracting recruits from not only the Middle East and North Africa, but also Western countries, with over 272 foreign fighters coming from the United States. A study by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) at King's College in London reported that by June 2018, 41,490 persons from 80 countries had joined ISIS in both Iraq and Syria. Thirteen percent of these were women and 12 percent were minors. Of the 41,490 foreign fighters in Syria, the ICSR study reports that 7,366 (or about 18 percent) have returned to their country of origin, including 1,765 (or 30 percent) of the 5,904 who originally departed from Western Europe. According to an August 2018 United Nations report, "Member States noted that flows of returnees and relocators from Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic had not materialized to the degree expected, but the vast majority of those who had successfully left the conflict zone had returned home rather than relocating elsewhere."

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(Sources: [Combating Terrorism Center](#) [30], [United Nations Security Council](#) [31])

It has also been reported that internally displaced people (IDP) camps have become ISIS's new frontier for recruitment and radicalization. Tens of thousands of former ISIS fighters and their families live in IDP camps in the Levant, which has provided former militants the opportunity to regroup. ISIS has taken over a few camps already—with al-Hol being their largest takeover. ISIS exerts more control at al-Hol than the guards stationed there and have enforced sharia law on all of the camp's inhabitants. The camp houses numerous women and children who are particularly vulnerable to deferring to the fundamental agenda that ISIS espouses. In some cases, women are reportedly enforcers for the camp's "morality brigade," or have even taken up arms in battle. (Sources: [New York Times](#) [32], [Washington Post](#) [33])

Muslim Brotherhood

The [Muslim Brotherhood](#) [34] is a transnational Sunni Islamist movement that seeks to implement sharia (Islamic law) under a global caliphate. In 1942, Mustafa al-Sibai founded the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria as an extension of the Brotherhood in Egypt, which was founded by Hassan al-Banna in 1928. The Brotherhood in Syria is currently led by its comptroller general, Mohammad Hikmat Walid, who has led the group since 2014. Some analysts also argue that the Brotherhood has served as the ideological forerunner of modern violent Islamist groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS. The group has been labeled a terrorist organization by the governments of Bahrain, Egypt, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and the United Arab Emirates. (Sources: [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#) [35], [Enab Baladi](#) [36], [Middle East Eye](#) [37])

The Brotherhood has been politically active in Syria since 1946, represented by several members of parliament and participating in governments until 1963. When the Baath Party came to power, efforts were made to undermine the Brotherhood, culminating in a decision to ban its activities in 1964. In 1964, Brotherhood member Marwan Hadid formed a violent offshoot—known as the Fighting Vanguard—whose members waged numerous terror attacks against the regime in the 1970s and early 1980s. At that time, armed Brotherhood members assassinated government officials and bombed government premises and Baath Party offices. (Sources: [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#) [35], [Carnegie Middle East Center](#) [38])

In 1970, Baathist Defense Minister Hafez al-Assad consolidated power among his sectarian minority—the Alawites—and assumed the Syrian presidency in 1971. In response, the Brotherhood sought to brand itself as the leader of Syria's Sunni majority against what it perceived as the commandeering Shiite minority. Pervasive corruption in Assad's regime led to popular resentment and unrest across Syria. In 1975, Syrian authorities arrested Hadid, who died from a hunger strike in Syrian prison in 1976. In revenge for his death, the Fighting Vanguard launched an assassination campaign against top Syrian officials. Meanwhile, in the late 1970s, the Brotherhood's radical "northern axis" organized massive anti-regime demonstrations in the Syrian cities of Aleppo and Hama, whose residents reportedly felt disenfranchised. Throughout this time, the Brotherhood maintained ideological and organizational distinction from its violent offshoot. (Sources: [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#) [39], [Al Monitor](#) [40], *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* by Patrick Seale (p. 324), *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria* by Raphael Lefevre (p. 57), *Inside the Brotherhood in Syria* by Hazem Kandil (p. 156))

In 1975, Adnan Saad al-Din of Hama was elected supreme guide of the Brotherhood. Under his leadership, the movement was reorganized and developed into a sophisticated hierarchical organization with offices, formal mechanisms, and a clear division of labor. Furthermore, the Brotherhood developed a military wing and launched jihad to turn Syria into a sharia state. From the winter of 1976 until the summer of 1979, various groups affiliated with the Brotherhood attacked high-ranking members of the state, the Baath Party, the Alawite sect, and even isolated military positions and camps. In 1979, the Fighting Vanguard defected from the Brotherhood to take up arms against the regime, and it launched an attack in which 83 Alawite student officers were killed at the military artillery school in Aleppo. In June 1980, Brotherhood members attempted to assassinate Assad using grenades and machine guns. Assad's government launched a crackdown on the group and gunned down hundreds of Brotherhood members in their prison cells. These events prompted then-President Hafez al-Assad to issue, in 1980, Law 49 banning the Muslim Brotherhood and imposing the death penalty on its members. (Source: [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#) [35])

Violence continued until the launch of a large-scale military operation by the regime against the Fighting Vanguard in Hama in February 1982 in which 10,000 to 25,000 of the city's inhabitants were killed. The Brotherhood then withdrew

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from political life in Syria. Its surviving leaders and many of its members were exiled. In 1982, in order to quell a Brotherhood uprising in the city of Hama, Hafez al-Assad dealt a near-fatal blow to the group, killing between 10,000 and 40,000 armed Brotherhood members and civilians. The group was nearly incapacitated as surviving Brotherhood leaders fled into exile. (Sources: [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#) [35], [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#) [41], [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#) [39], [Middle East Policy Council](#) [42], [Al Monitor](#) [40], [Middle East Voices](#) [43], [Wilson Center](#) [44])

During the 1990s and 2000s, however, the Brotherhood—still in exile—sought to rebrand itself as a non-violent, politically minded group. As popular protests erupted in Syria in March 2011, the Brotherhood remobilized and moved to consolidate political and military power among the opposition. Amid the ensuing tumult of the civil war, the Brotherhood established recruitment offices and urged its members in large Syrian cities to return to smaller communities and reconnect with the citizens there. The Brotherhood found success in recruiting members from rebel-held areas of Syria, especially in and near Aleppo. In spring 2015, Reuters reported that hundreds of Syrian Brotherhood members had returned to Syria from exile. Membership in the organization remains punishable by death, though the Brotherhood largely operates in opposition-held areas including in Aleppo, Idlib, and Hama. Indeed, the Brotherhood remains sidelined and ineffective as jihadist organizations increasingly dominate the Syrian opposition. (Sources: [Carnegie Endowment](#) [45], [National](#) [46], [Reuters](#) [47])

ISIS

[ISIS](#) [48] is an extremist group formed from al-Qaeda offshoots in Iraq and Syria. Since its formation in 2013, ISIS has worked to sustain a self-declared caliphate in eastern Syria and western Iraq. In February of 2014, al-Qaeda and ISIS formally severed ties. Ultimately, ISIS seeks to unite the world under a single caliphate and has expanded into over nine countries. Initially, ISIS gained support within Iraq as a Sunni insurgency group fighting what some Sunnis viewed as a partisan Shiite-led Iraqi government. The group has since garnered additional momentum as a result of the Syrian civil war, and has recruited up to 33,000 fighters from around the world. Thousands of foreign ISIS fighters are estimated to have been killed in battle, while some have returned or are planning to return to their home countries. (Sources: [Reuters](#) [49], [Europol](#) [50], [Soufan Center](#) [51])

ISIS adopted the slogan “remain and expand” shortly after its leader, [Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi](#) [24], declared the caliphate at the start of Ramadan in June of 2014. ISIS expected the fight against the opposition to last for generations and heavily invested in indoctrinating children into its forces. (Source: [Institute for the Study of War](#) [52])

At its height, ISIS controlled about 34,000 square miles of territory from western Syria to eastern Iraq. Their strategic takeover of oil fields, partnered with tactics of extortion, kidnapping, and robbery, allowed the group to generate billions of dollars in revenue. However, once the United States and its coalition partners began to seize back terrain in April of 2015, ISIS adjusted its strategy that coupled defensive tactics along with the group’s standard offensive campaign. According to scholars at the Institute for the Study of War, ISIS’s operational objectives included to destroy key Sunni Arab cities under its control, to impose high costs on counter-ISIS forces, and to retain psychological control over civilian populations as long as possible. Additionally, ISIS waged five major lines of effort in pursuit of these goals: (1) seize new cities outside of Iraq and Syria; (2) increase global terror attacks; (3) conduct fortified defense of key cities in Iraq and Syria (4) attrite counter-ISIS forces, and (5) undermine religious rivals. (Sources: [BBC News](#) [53], [Institute for the Study of War](#) [52])

Beginning in late 2018, ISIS fighters have begun to carry out prison breaks. On September 29, 2018, at least 10 militants escaped from Al-Bab correctional facility in northern Syria and on March 12, 2019, over 80 prisoners escaped from an HTS-run prison in Idlib. On April 7, 2019, ISIS militants attempted to break out of a detention facility in Derik, in the Kurdish administered area of Syria. YPG forces managed to thwart the attempt. It is still uncertain whether these prison breaks were coordinated events or undertaken by independent cells. Many of the escaped fighters were later recaptured. ISIS will also attack displacement camps in order to free sympathetic civilians held in de facto detention. It already conducted one such attack against an IDP camp along the Middle Euphrates River Valley on October 11-12, 2018, releasing 130 families. According to scholars at the Institute for the Study of War, ISIS likely intends to repatriate the former population of its caliphate and thus will likely attack other displacement camps in Iraq and Syria. (Sources: [Military Times](#) [54], [Institute for the Study of War](#) [52])

Despite ISIS’s territorial defeat on March 23, 2019, central provinces outside Iraq and Syria are contributing resources to

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the insurgency, which is providing the group with the necessary resources and backup to reestablish itself. Its external provinces outside Iraq and Syria are contributing resources to its insurgency in those countries while giving the organization renewed global momentum. On May 31, 2019, ISIS declared a new global campaign called the “Battle of Attrition.” Its propaganda instructed its forces to seize terrain temporarily as a way to attrite their opponents. According to Jennifer Cafarella, Brandon Wallace, and Jason Zhou at the Institute for the Study of War, ISIS’s successful reconstitution of a physical caliphate in Iraq and Syria would produce new waves of ISIS attacks in Europe and dangerously legitimize ISIS’s narrative of inevitable long-term victory. (Sources: [BBC News](#) [55], [Associated Press](#) [56], [Institute for the Study of War](#) [57])

On October 26, 2019, U.S. Special Forces conducted a raid in northwestern Syria, culminating in the death of Baghdadi. U.S. President Donald Trump confirmed Baghdadi’s death, the next day. Baghdadi, who was 48 years old, killed himself and his three children, detonating a suicide vest in a tunnel while being pursued by U.S. troops. ISIS’s media arm, the Amaq News Agency, confirmed the death a few days later on October 31, 2019. In an audio recording uploaded on the Telegram app, ISIS mourned the loss of Baghdadi as well as its spokesman, Abu Hassan al-Muhajir, who was killed a day after Baghdadi in a U.S. led airstrike. Muhajir had widely been considered Baghdadi’s potential successor. However, ISIS released a recording on October 30th where the new ISIS spokesman, Abu Hamza al-Quraishi, announced ISIS’s new leader, [Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Quraishi](#) [11], the *nom de guerre* of Amir Mohammed Abdul Rahman al-Mawli al-Salbi. Al-Salbi was a former officer in Saddam Hussein’s army and was considered one of the most prominent ISIS members in Baghdadi’s circle. Following the U.S.-led occupation of Iraq and the capture of Hussein in 2003, al-Salbi turned to violent extremism and eventually took on the role of religious commissary and a general Sharia jurist for al-Qaeda. In 2014, al-Salbi left al-Qaeda and pledged allegiance and full support to the radical’s mission, providing ISIS the support to quickly take control of the city. (Source: [New York Times](#) [12], [Wall Street Journal](#) [13], [Wall Street Journal](#) [14], [Washington Post](#) [15], [Military Times](#) [16], [New York Times](#) [17], [National](#) [58], [CNN](#) [59], [Al Monitor](#) [60], [Daily Mail](#) [61])

The People’s Protection Units (YPG)

The People’s Protection Units (YPG) and its all-female affiliate, the Women’s Protection Unit (YPJ), are the armed wing of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party of Syria. An offshoot of the Kurdistan Worker’s Party, or PKK, the YPG was created in 2003 and like the PKK, seeks autonomy for Syria’s Kurds and has shown a willingness to work with any power capable of advancing that goal. The PKK seeks an autonomous region for Kurds inside Turkey and has fought Turkish forces since 1984. The PKK is outlawed by Turkey and considered a terrorist organization by the United States and the European Union. Although both Turkish forces and the YPG are part of the same coalition against ISIS, Turkish troops in northern Syria continue to attack the YPG. The YPG had been a major component of the U.S.-led effort to combat ISIS in Syria and as of October 2019, controls approximately a third of Syria. The YPG ranks are thought to include tens of thousands of fighters, including hundreds of fighters from abroad. (Sources: [Washington Post](#) [62], [Reuters](#) [63])

Some rebels accuse the YPG of collaborating with Assad, who has supported the PKK and whose decision to withdraw forces from several majority-Kurdish areas in northern Syria in mid-2012 allowed the YPG to establish control there. In 2014, the YPG launched a social media campaign to rescue Iraq’s minority Yazidis who were being relentlessly targeted and killed by ISIS. Their mission to rescue the Yazidis attracted international attention that indirectly led to the enlistment of hundreds of foreign fighters to the YPG’s humanitarian mission. According to recent data by the United Nations, the YPG recruited over 224 children in 2017, and according to Human Rights Watch, the children voluntarily enlisted in order to financially support their families. The YPG maintains an active Internet profile that has made it easy for interested individuals from countries all over to enlist and contribute to the fight against ISIS. (Sources: [Washington Post](#) [62], [CNN](#) [64], [United Nations](#) [65], [Human Rights Watch](#) [66], [New York Times](#) [67])

In 2015, when the U.S. established the Syrian Democratic Forces to counter ISIS, the YPG served as a crucial addition to the forces. In May 2017, the U.S. began to allocate ammunition to the YPG to retake the city of Raqqa from ISIS. In October 2019, following U.S. President Trump’s announcement of the immediate withdrawal of American forces in northern Syria—and essentially leaving the YPG vulnerable to greater attacks from Turkish forces—the YPG has said it would now prioritize defending its fellow Kurds over the larger battle of preventing the resurgence of ISIS. The group has said in the past that it would consider a deal with Assad if the U.S. leaves Syria. (Sources: [Washington Post](#) [62], [CNN](#) [64])

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The Nusra Front

The [Nusra Front](#) [26]—also known as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (“the Levantine Conquest Front”)—is an internationally sanctioned terrorist group, the second-strongest insurgent group in Syria after ISIS, and a formerly open al-Qaeda affiliate that seeks to replace the Assad regime with an Islamic state. Operating as a part of the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) coalition since January 2017, the Nusra Front stands accused of serving as a base for global al-Qaeda operations. In the years since its formation in 2011, when al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) emir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi sent AQI operative Abu Muhammad al-Julani to Syria to organize regional jihadist cells, the Nusra Front has gradually amassed and sustained territory throughout Syria. As of late 2019, the Nusra Front controls or administers all of the Syrian opposition-held parts of Idlib, north Hama, and west Aleppo. (Sources: [Long War Journal](#) [68], [Reuters](#) [69], [Syrian War Daily](#) [70], [Ashawraq al-Awsat](#) [71], [Syrian War Daily](#) [72])

The Nusra Front began targeting ISIS in January 2014 amid rising tensions between ISIS and the Sunni opposition forces. Additionally on July 28, 2016, al-Qaeda released an audio statement allowing the Nusra Front to end its affiliation with al-Qaeda. Following the split, Nusra changed its name to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham. Throughout the conflict, the group has sought to cast itself as an irreplaceable military ally for opposition forces, and has a longstanding military partnership with Ahrar al-Sham. (Sources: [Center for International Security and Cooperation](#) [73], [Reuters](#) [74], [Jihadica](#) [75], [Associated Press](#) [76], [Reuters](#) [74])

Since its founding, the Nusra Front has conducted formal military campaigns, assassinations, hostage takings, and “lone wolf” operations, including suicide bombings. By June 2013, the Nusra Front had claimed responsibility for 57 out of 70 suicide attacks conducted during Syria’s civil war. The group has since continued to carry out its signature suicide bombings in Syria and expanded its operations into neighboring Lebanon after Hezbollah joined the war in mid-2013. In Lebanon, the Nusra Front works to stoke sectarian divisions, conducting and attempting suicide bombings against civilian centers like Beirut and Hezbollah strongholds like Hermel, along Lebanon’s northeastern border with Syria. The Nusra Front also employs arbitrary detention and torture in order to silence its critics and opposition activists. According to a Human Rights Watch report, HTS detained more than 184 people in Idlib in the last three months of 2018. Other human rights organizations accuse HTS of arresting at least 622 people between January 2017 and August 2019. (Sources: [Long War Journal](#) [77], [Reuters](#) [78], [Al Jazeera](#) [79], [Daily Star](#) [80], [Al Jazeera](#) [81], [Now](#) [82], [Human Rights Watch](#) [83], [Syria Direct](#) [84])

The Nusra Front has attracted the largest contingency of foreign fighters to Syria after ISIS, reportedly consisting of 3,000 to 4,000 foreigners as of late 2018. The group regularly engages in violent clashes with other rebel groups in northern Syria, and conducts operations to arrest civilian protesters. (Sources: [Al Jazeera](#) [85], [CNN](#) [86], [Bellingcat](#) [87])

Since its inception, the Nusra Front continues to be well-funded. By August 2016, the group received streams of funding through a variety of means, including taxation, tariffs, fines, ransoms, international donations, oil sales, looting, and smuggling. In September 2019, HTS commander Abu al-Abed al-Ashida released a video statement accusing HTS of corrupt internal practices. In the video, Ashida claimed HTS had a monthly income of \$13 million. (Sources: [Washington Post](#) [88], [Hate Speech International](#) [89], [YouTube](#) [90])

In order to join the Nusra Front, the group has historically required its recruits to procure *tazkiyya* (a voucher on behalf of the recruit) from two commanders on the front lines. Once the recruit is accepted, he swears *bay’ah* (an oath of allegiance) to the group, thereby cementing his religious commitment. The Nusra Front has also recruited its members online and in private messaging applications through its former media branches, al-Minara al-Bayda and Fursan al-Sham media. Within Syria, the group has attracted recruits by appealing to the locals in a strategy adopted from al-Qaeda jihadist Abu Musab al-Suri. When it comes to attracting recruits, the Nusra Front holds a financial advantage over competing rebel groups, as it has historically been able to provide members with salaries and weapons. Under HTS, a new media outlet has been created, Ebaa Agency, which produces high-quality videos, infographics, and media statements similar to those of Amaq, ISIS’s media wing. (Sources: [Quilliam Foundation](#) [91], [National \(UAE\)](#) [92], [Washington Post](#) [88], [Long War Journal](#) [93])

In addition to recruiting guerilla fighters through online and in-person efforts, the Nusra Front stands accused of recruiting child soldiers. The U.N. Human Rights Council’s Independent Commission on Syria has issued reports on the Nusra Front’s successful recruitment of child soldiers continuing into 2017. In Idlib province, Nusra fighters include boys under the age of 18 and 15, with some manning checkpoints. The Commission found that the Nusra Front specifically

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targets poor, uneducated boys for recruitment, paying them modest salaries used to support the boys' families. (Source: [U.N. Human Rights Council](#) [94])

Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement (NZD)

The Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zenki, or the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement (NZD), was a Sunni Islamist group based in Aleppo. Founded in late 2011 by Tawfiq Shahabuddin in the countryside of Eastern Aleppo, the NZD was one of the strongest factions within the Free Syrian Army (FSA) to defect and join Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). The movement's forces were estimated to number around 7,000. It played a prominent role in the fight against ISIS, helping to expel ISIS from the city of Aleppo in 2014. Until September 2016, NDZ was a recipient of financial and arms support from the United States. (Sources: [Deutsche Welle](#) [95], [Los Angeles Times](#) [96])

Although once siding with the FSA, NZD defected to the rebel camp sometime before 2016. In June 2016, a video of the group circulated showing its members beheading a 15-year-old boy who reportedly was a member of the pro-government Liwaa al-Quds (Jerusalem Brigade) faction. It is speculated by analysts at the Atlantic Council that NZD shifted their approach and chose to defect from the FSA when the Friends of Syria Group—an alliance of Western and Arab Gulf countries opposed to Assad—stopped providing NZD assistance in early 2015. The shift in NZD's ideology and alliances raised many questions given how organized the group was. The group featured a Shura Council, as well as specialized political, military, administrative, service, relief, and medical offices, all of which employed specialists, politicians, officers, and graduates. (Sources: [Deutsche Welle](#) [95], [Reuters](#) [97], [Atlantic Council](#) [98], [Los Angeles Times](#) [96])

In January 2017, NDZ joined the newly formed HTS, which resulted from the merger of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and three other opposition groups of the FSA. The Zenki movement merged with Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya on February 18, 2018. On March 26, 2019, the NZD announced its dissolution in favor of forming the "Third Brigade" along with Faylaq al Majd. The Third Brigade supports the Turkey-backed Free Syrian Army. The group's reorganization included removing top leader Tawfiq Sabah al-Deen and designating Abu Bashir and Abu al-Yaman as managers of the brigades. (Sources: [Carter Center](#) [99], [Deutsche Welle](#) [95], [Islamic World News](#) [100], [Syrian War Daily](#) [101])

Hezbollah

[Hezbollah](#) [102] is a transnational terrorist group founded in Iran in the early 1980s as a way for Tehran to expand its influence in the region. Iran has transferred mass quantities of weapons, fighters and other supplies to Hezbollah through its [Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps](#) [103] (IRGC), using Syria as a transfer point. It has been responsible for transferring thousands of rockets, which Hezbollah has used against Israeli civilians. In addition to its violently anti-Israel position, Hezbollah's loyalty to Iran has translated into Hezbollah involvement on behalf of Assad's government in Syria's civil war. However, since 2015, the Assad regime, backed by Russian military support, has sought to redefine its relationship with Hezbollah to reverse the group's influence on Syrian society. (Source: [Carnegie Middle East Center](#) [104])

In 2012, the U.S. Treasury Department levied additional sanctions on Hezbollah for its support of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime. According to the Treasury, since the beginning of the Syrian civil war in early 2011, Hezbollah provided "training, advice and extensive logistical support to the Government of Syria's increasingly ruthless efforts to fight against the opposition." Since 2013, Hezbollah's fighters have fought alongside Syrian military and paramilitary forces, openly carrying out attacks along the Lebanese-Syrian border and allowing Assad to retake rebel-held areas in central Syria. However, Hezbollah's current role in Syria is to serve as an extension of Iran's military entrenchment, focusing more on deterring Israel and less on fending off ISIS and other Syrian rebel groups. (Sources: [U.S. Department of the Treasury](#) [105], [Institute for the Study of War](#) [106], [U.S. Department of State](#) [107])

On October 19, 2016, Hezbollah's second in command, Naim Qassem, told Hezbollah's Al-Manar TV that Hezbollah "will not leave Syria as long as there is a need to confront takfiri groups." In September 2017, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah declared victory in Syria. "We have won in the war," he said, according to Al-Akhbar. However, in June 2018, Lebanese parliamentary speaker Nabih Berri, of the Hezbollah-allied Amal movement, told Russian media that Hezbollah and Iran would remain in Syria until it is "fully liberated from terrorists." In September 2018, Nasrallah declared that Hezbollah would remain in Syria indefinitely with the Syrian government's permission. (Sources: [Al Amanar](#) [108], [Reuters](#)

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[109], [Al Jazeera](#) [110], [Reuters](#) [111])

In the early stages of the Syrian war, Hezbollah's support for the Assad regime was limited to small numbers of trainers and advisers. Hezbollah leaders did not confirm their activities in Syria until 2013, when Nasrallah announced that he was sending fighters to aid the Syrian government. It is estimated that Hezbollah has between 7,000 and 10,000 fighters in Syria—the largest deployment anywhere in the world outside of Lebanon. (Sources: [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#) [112], [Wall Street Journal](#) [113])

Hezbollah has carried out a sophisticated information campaign in Syria to support its political and military objectives, using television, radio, print media, the Internet, and social media to spread its message as the self-proclaimed protector of Shia communities and holy sites throughout Lebanon and Syria. To achieve its political and military goals, Hezbollah has redirected significant personnel, capabilities, and resources from Lebanon to Syria. The conflict in Syria has both strengthened and improved Hezbollah's military capabilities as the group adjusted its battlefield strategies based on collaboration with Iran and Russia, as well as less-sophisticated Iranian battlefield proxies from Afghanistan and other countries. (Source: [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#) [112])

Hezbollah's participation in Syria has increased tensions among the Middle East's Sunni Arab nations who oppose the Shiite group and the presence of its sponsor country, Iran, throughout the region. The Gulf Cooperative Council (GCC) designated Hezbollah a terrorist group in March 2016 because of its "hostile acts" against GCC member states, recruitment for "terrorist attacks, smuggling weapons and explosives, stirring up sedition and incitement to chaos and violence," and participation in the Syrian civil war. The Arab League also labeled Hezbollah a terrorist group that month, accusing Hezbollah and the IRGC of financing and training terrorist groups and interfering in regional affairs. The GCC had previously sanctioned Hezbollah in 2013 for its role in Syria. On November 19, 2017, the Arab League further condemned Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, citing its regional disruption efforts on behalf of Iran. (Sources: [Reuters](#) [114], [Reuters](#) [115], [CNN](#) [116])

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Israel has allegedly been behind hundreds of airstrikes against Iran-backed paramilitary fighters, government troops, and Hezbollah militants in Syria since the start of the civil war in 2011. On May 31, 2020, an airstrike was launched in eastern Syria that struck three military vehicles, killing five paramilitary fighters. The war monitor claimed that "Israel was likely responsible." Additionally, the Syrian Observatory reported that an unidentified aircraft targeted M'eizileh base which is controlled by Iranian forces and Iran-backed militias. The attack killed seven militiamen. Israel rarely confirms its operations in Syria, but Jerusalem often contends that Iran's presence in the region poses significant risks for Israel. (Sources: [Middle East Eye](#) [117], [Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#) [118])

Jaysh al-Islam

Formerly known as Liwa al-Islam, the group was later renamed to Jaysh al-Islam in 2013 when Liwa al-Islam joined the Islamic Coalition—a political group that opposed the Assad regime. It aims to replace the Assad government with a Syria that is based on Islamic law. Jaysh al-Islam's central mission is to "fight Assad and [refuse] ISIS's takfiri mentality." The Jaysh al-Islam, or Army of Islam, coalition is centered in the Damascus area and eastern Ghouta, with over 10-15,000 members, making it the largest rebel faction in the eastern Ghouta area. Jaysh al-Islam differs from al-Qaeda and ISIS—groups Jaysh al-Islam considers deviations from and a danger to Islam—in that Jaysh-al-Islam does not call for eliminating western presence in the Middle East or creating a single Islamic state. The group's founder, Zahran Aloush, recruited many of its members and expanded its arsenal of military equipment. Aloush was assassinated by the Syrian military in a 2015 airstrike. The group is now headed by Essam al-Buwaydhani. (Sources: [BBC News](#) [119], [Center for International Security and Cooperation](#) [120], [OFAC](#) [121], [Deutsche Welle](#) [95])

Failaq al-Rahman

Founded in 2013, Failaq al-Rahman (or al-Rahman Legion or al-Rahman Corps) includes over 9,000 fighters. The organization describes itself as "a revolutionary military entity aiming for the downfall of the Syrian regime," but it does not seek to turn Syria into an Islamic state. The group's military commander, Abdul-Nasser Shmeir, is a former captain of the Syrian army. The group is said to have been allied with Turkey, Qatar, and HTS against Jaysh al-Islam in eastern

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Ghouta It is also connected to the Free Syrian Army, one of the biggest rebel coalitions formed at the beginning of the Syrian civil war in 2011. The group is well-resourced as it produces its own weaponry in primitive factories. The group is also taking part in the peace talks in Geneva and Astana. (Sources: [BBC News](#) [119], [Deutsche Welle](#) [95], [Associated Press](#) [122])

Ahrar al-Sham

The Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya, better known as Ahrar al-Sham, aims to also form an Islamic state in Syria based on sharia. A Sunni Salafist militant group and HTS's main rival, Ahrar al-Sham emerged in 2011 following the outbreak of the Syrian revolution. The group is estimated to have over 25,000 fighters. Although Ahrar al-Sham officials tried to brand the group as moderate, in 2016, Ahrar al-Sham commander Abu Yahya al-Hamawi expressed his desire to expand ties to the Nusra Front as part of an effort to "re-empower Islam." Ahrar al-Sham is known for pioneering the use of IEDs as a tool of insurgency as well as targeting military bases to capture weapons such as mobile artillery and anti-guided missiles. Ahrar al-Sham broke ties with ISIS following Baghdadi's opposition to reconciliation efforts between Syrian Sunni militant groups. According to analysts at Stanford's Center for International Security and Cooperation, given the impact of Ahrar al-Sham's attacks, the organization has allegedly received money from donors in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey to counter Syrian government forces. (Sources: [Deutsche Welle](#) [95], [Washington Post](#) [123], [Middle East Monitor](#) [124], [Mapping Militant Organizations](#) [125] at Staford, [Deutsche Welle](#) [126])

Ahrar al-Sham has formed three prominent umbrella organizations—the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF), the Islamic Front, and Jaysh al-Fatah—and often absorbs smaller groups when organizations begin to lose support. Ahrar al-Sham formed its first umbrella organization, the SIF, in December 2012 in order to unite Syrian Islamic opposition forces and pursue a Syrian government that implements Shariah law. (Sources: [Mapping Militant Organizations](#) [125], [Long War Journal](#) [127])

Hurras al-Din

Hurras al-Din (HaD or Guardians of the Religion) is a U.S. Specially Designated Terrorist Organization and an HTS splinter group that is widely believed to be al-Qaeda's new affiliate in Syria. HaD is largely made up of HTS defectors. Founded in February 2018, HaD is led by Khaled al-Aruri (a.k.a. Abu al-Qasim al-Urduni) and shura council members Samir Hijazi (a.k.a. Abu Hamam al-Shami or Faruq al-Suri), Sami al-Uraydi (a.k.a. Abu Mahmud al-Sham), Bilal Khuraysat (a.k.a. Abu Hudhayfah al-Urduni), Faraj Ahmad Nanaa, and Abu Abd al-Karim al-Masri. Its founding statement urged "the fighting factions in al-Sham to stop fighting among themselves and save the tent of Muslims." Following the plea, over sixteen factions joined HaD. HaD claims to have carried out over 200 attacks since its inception. (Sources: [Federal Register](#) [128], [BBC News](#) [27], [Washington Institute](#) [129])

HaD further strengthened its military capacity by establishing different fighting alliances. Included among the alliances are: Hilf Nusrat al-Islam which was founded in April of 2018 and Wa-Hardh al-Muminin Operations Room in October of 2018. Further alliances include Jabhat Ansar al-Din and Jamaat Ansar al-Islam—two al-Qaeda aligned groups. (Sources: [BBC News](#) [27], [Washington Institute](#) [129])

HaD dedicates a significant amount of time in spreading its ideology throughout Idlib. Along with a clerical establishment, HaD has also established a "Committee for Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong." Activities of the committee include conducting *hisba* patrols (moral policing). Additionally, HaD and its Wa-Hardh al-Muminin Operations Room have raised funds for military activities locally and online as part of their "Jahizuna Campaign." The funds are used for weaponry—particularly AK-47s, bullets, rocket-propelled grenades—food, fuel, and medical treatment for wounded fighters. The campaign began in May of 2019 and provided supporters with designated Telegram and WhatsApp accounts that detailed how to send funds to the campaign. (Source: [Washington Institute](#) [129])

Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba

Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba is a U.S. sanctioned, radical Iraqi Shiite militia group that operates under the leadership of the Iran's IRGC - Quds Force. The group is led by Secretary General [Akram al-Kaabi](#) [130], and is estimated to have over 10,000 fighters. The movement is loyal to Iran, helping create a supply route through Iraq to Damascus. Kaabi was also a former leading figure in [Asaib Ahl al-Haq](#) [131] (AAH) and was designated by the U.S. government as a Specially

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Designated Global Terrorist in March of 2019. Kaabi left AAH in 2012, and with support from Iran, founded Nujaba to mobilize Iraqi militants into Syria, eventually becoming one of the largest Iraqi contingents in the country. Kaabi is said to have been close to Major General [Qasem Soleimani](#) [3], the former leader of the Quds Force, Hassan Nasrallah, the Secretary General of Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, a specially designated global terrorist who directed Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces until his death in January 2020. In 2014, when ISIS began to take over parts of Southeast Syria near the border of Iraq and Jordan, Nujaba further legitimized its status as a forceful militia as they managed to swiftly deploy troops between Syria and Iraq to undermine the insurgency. Along with its campaign to deter the presence of Sunni jihadists, Nujaba has mostly shifted its focus on subverting Israeli presence throughout the Golan Heights. (Sources: [Reuters](#) [132], [Foundation for Defense of Democracies](#) [133], [Long War Journal](#) [134], [National](#) [135], [Middle East Institute](#) [136])

Palestinian Islamic Jihad

Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) is a U.S.-designated, Iran-sponsored Palestinian terrorist organization based in the Gaza Strip. The group has carried out numerous suicide bombings and rocket attacks against Israel. PIJ's leadership has operated from Syria since 1989, when they relocated from Lebanon after Israel expelled them a year earlier. According to the U.S. State Department, PIJ's senior leadership continues to reside primarily in Syria, though most PIJ members live in Gaza. International Arabic-language newspaper *Asharq Al-Awsat* reported in 2012 that PIJ's Syria-based leadership had relocated to Iran but continued to enjoy positive ties with their Syrian patrons. However, a PIJ official denied that report, claiming "relations between [PIJ] and the Syrian government are excellent, unlike Hamas," whose leadership left Syria after refusing to support the Assad regime during the Syrian civil war. Official representatives of the group are also stationed elsewhere in the Middle East, including Iran. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#) [137], [Asharq Al-Awsat](#) [138], [Al-Monitor](#) [139], [Tasnim News Agency](#) [140])

Israel has carried out multiple strikes in Syria targeting PIJ infrastructure and its leadership there. On October 5, 2003, for example, Israel bombed a PIJ training camp in Syria in retaliation for a PIJ suicide bombing in Haifa, Israel, that killed 21 people the day before. On February 23, 2020, Israel killed two PIJ members during air raids on PIJ training facilities and weapons depots in Damascus in response to PIJ rocket fire on Israel from Gaza. PIJ launched dozens of rockets from Gaza toward Israel in response to the Syrian strike. (Sources: [Fox News](#) [141], [Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#) [142], [Al Jazeera](#) [143], [BBC News](#) [144])

Major Extremist and Terrorist Incidents

- **February 24, 2020:** Turkish security forces arrest five YPG terrorists in Tal Abyad, northern Syria. It is suspected that the militants were plotting a terror attack. Source: [Anadolu Agency](#) [145]
- **February 16, 2020:** A bomb-laden truck detonates in Tal Abyad district. The attack kills four and wounds five others. It is suspected that the YPG is responsible for the attack. Source: [Anadolu Agency](#) [146]
- **February 4, 2020:** YPG militants launch a missile attack in Afrin, northwestern Syria. The missiles targeted two schools and a mosque, killing one and wounding seven others. Sources: [Anadolu Agency](#) [147], [Daily Sabah](#) [148]
- **January 27, 2020:** Turkish security forces arrest five YPG terrorists in Tal Abyad, northern Syria. The suspects were allegedly plotting terrorist attacks as during the bust, weapons, digital materials, and documents relating to the terror group were recovered. Source: [Anadolu Agency](#) [149]
- **January 22, 2020 - January 23, 2020:** Militants from the Islamic Party of Turkistan and Tahrir al-Sham ambush government forces in Idlib over a period of two days. Syrian state media does not immediately release details of the offensive, but reports that the attacks included car bombs and heavy gunfire. The attacks kill up to 40 soldiers. The fighters seize two Idlib settlements, which forces the Syrian army to abandon some of their positions in the de-escalation zone. However, Syrian Armed forces manage to repel the insurgents. Sources: [Al Jazeera](#) [4], [Reuters](#) [5], [Arab News](#) [150]
- **January 14, 2020:** ISIS militants ambush a border checkpoint near Al-Waleed port. The attack wounds four members of the Border Guard Forces command. Source: [Kurdistan 24](#) [151]
- **January 12, 2020:** Unidentified militants carry out a mortar attack in Aleppo. The attack kills two and injures three others. Source: [MENA FN](#) [152]
- **January 9, 2020:** A car bomb detonates near a roadside security checkpoint in northeast Syria, near the Euphrates River. The attack kills four. It is suspected that the YPG is responsible for the explosion. Source: [Reuters](#) [153]

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- **January 7, 2020:** Turkish police arrest seven people in western Turkey suspected of being ISIS members. Among the suspects are five Syrian nationals. Police sources claim the “suspects were in contact with people in conflict zones and were plotting terrorist attacks.” Source: [Kurdistan 24](#) [154]
- **January 4, 2020:** The U.S.-led military coalition fighting ISIS announces that it will temporarily halt its counter-ISIS missions to focus on protecting Iraqi bases from Iranian-backed militias. Following the death of IRGC-QF leader Qasem Soleimani on January 2, 2020 by a U.S. drone strike, Major General Hossein Dehghan—the military adviser to Iran’s Supreme leader—stated that Tehran’s response will “for sure be military.” Dehghan further claimed that Iran would retaliate directly against U.S. “military sites.” Sources: [New York Times](#) [7], [CNN](#) [8]
- **December 25, 2019:** YPG militants carry out a bomb attack in Jarabulus, northern Syria. The attack injures 14. Source: [Anadolu Agency](#) [155]
- **December 19, 2019:** The YPG detonates a car bomb in Turkish controlled, Tal Halaf. The attack kills five and injures an unconfirmed number of others. Source: [The New Arab](#) [156]
- **December 18, 2019:** The YPG detonates a car bomb in Tel Abu Shayh, northern Syria. The attack kills one person and injures 26 others. Source: [Anadolu Agency](#) [157]
- **December 2, 2019:** Regime forces and armed groups engage in heavy clashes on the edge of Idlib, Syria’s last opposition bastion. Over 51 regime fighters are killed in the attack and 31 jihadists are also killed. The attack is the most deadly since a Russia-brokered ceasefire went into effect in late August of 2019. Source: [Telegraph](#) [158]
- **November 26, 2019:** A car bomb detonates in Tel Halaf. The explosion kills 17 and wounds another 20. It is suspected that the YPG is responsible for the attack. Source: [Al Jazeera](#) [159]
- **November 25, 2019:** U.S. troops resume large-scale counterterrorism missions against ISIS in northern Syria, nearly two months after the Trump administration’s abrupt order to withdraw American troops opened the way for a bloody Turkish cross-border offensive. Source: [New York Times](#) [160]
- **November 23, 2019:** YPG militants detonate a car bomb in Tal Abyad. At least three people are killed and another 20 are injured. Source: [Daily Sabah](#) [161]
- **November 10, 2019:** YPG militants detonate a car bomb in Tal Abyad. The attack kills eight and wounds another 20. Source: [Anadolu Agency](#) [162]
- **November 2, 2019:** YPG militants detonate a bomb-laden vehicle and attack a market in Tal Abyad. At least 13 civilians are killed and another 20 are injured. Source: [Daily Sabah](#) [163]
- **October 31, 2019:** An explosive-laden vehicle detonates in a grocery market at Afrin city center. The attack kills eight and wounds another 14. Although no group claims responsibility for the attack, it is suspected that the YPG terror group uses car bombs to attack civilians. Source: [Anadolu Agency](#) [164]
- **October 28, 2019:** A car bomb detonates in Suluk town. The attack kills one civilian and wounds seven others. The same day, a mine explodes in Cobaney town. The explosion kills one and wounds three others. The PKK claims responsibility for both attacks. Source: [Anadolu Agency](#) [165]
- **October 26, 2019 - October 31, 2019:** On October 26, a team of American Special Operations troops launch an assault on a militant compound sheltering ISIS leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in northwest Syria. During the raid, Baghdadi detonates an explosives vest, killing himself and three of his children. A day later, U.S. President Trump confirms Baghdadi’s death. Also on the 26th, U.S. forces launched an airstrike in northeast Syria. The strike targets and kills Abu al-Hassan al-Muhajir, ISIS’s spokesman and long-considered successor to Baghdadi. On October 31, Al Nurah Agency confirms that ISIS leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, as well as spokesman Abu Hassan al-Muhajir, are dead. Sources: [New York Times](#) [166], [Washington Post](#) [167], [Wall Street Journal](#) [14]
- **October 27, 2019:** The PKK launch an attack on Turkish forces in Tel Abyad, Syria. A Turkish soldier is killed and five others are wounded. Source: [Xinhua](#) [168]
- **October 16, 2019:** YPG militants open fire and launch missiles on residential areas in Jarabulus, northern Syria. The attack kills six and wounds another 15. That same day, YPG militants attack Azaz district, firing artillery shells. The attack wounds two civilians. Source: [Hurriyet Daily News](#) [169]
- **October 11, 2019:** A car bomb explodes in the predominantly Kurdish city of Qamishli, northern Syria. The bombing kills three and injures nine. It is suspected that ISIS is responsible for the attack. Sources: [Kurdistan 24](#) [170], [Long War Journal](#) [171]
- **September 17, 2019:** A missile attack by an unidentified aircraft hits a weapons depot belonging to the PMF in Al Bukamal, in the eastern Syrian province of Deir Az Zor. Conflicting reports suggest that there is anywhere from zero to 10 casualties. No group claims responsibility for the attack. Source: [Al Jazeera](#) [172]
- **August 19, 2019:** American and Iraqi military intelligence officers report that five months after ousting ISIS from Syria, the jihadist group has not only started to conduct guerilla attacks throughout Iraq and Syria, but has also been reestablishing its financial networks and actively recruiting at allied-run tent camps. Source: [New York Times](#) [173]
- **July 15, 2019:** Unidentified militants launch rockets onto Aleppo. The attack kills six and wounds eight others. It is suspected that HTS is behind the attack. Source: [Japan Times](#) [174]

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- **July 11, 2019:**A car bomb detonates outside of a Christian church in Qamishli, Syria. At least 11 people are injured in the attack. ISIS claims responsibility for the attack despite having lost its last stronghold of Baghuz in March. Source: [Defense Post](#) [175]
- **July 10, 2019 - July 12, 2019:**Violent clashes erupt between regime troops and jihad-dominated forces in Idlib. Violence is centered in Idlib. More than 100 people are killed in three days. Despite a truce, Russian and regime aircraft increase their aerial bombardments of the region which has been occupied by HTS, as well as other rebel and jihadist factions. Source: [France 24](#) [176]
- **March 23, 2019:**The SDF announces that ISIS has lost its final stronghold in Syria, bringing an end to the so-called caliphate declared in 2014. Source: [CNN](#) [177]
- **March 2019:**The U.S.-backed SDF launch an assault on ISIS's last territorial hold in Baghuz, Syria, on March 10. At least 20 suicide bombers attack SDF positions during the fighting. On March 12, hundreds of ISIS fighters and their families reportedly surrender to rebel forces. The SDF declare that the battle to retake Baghuz is as "good as over." The SDF claim to have killed 112 ISIS fighters by March 13. Sources: [Reuters](#) [178], [Reuters](#) [179], [Reuters](#) [180], [Guardian](#) [181], [Reuters](#) [182], [Voice of America](#) [183]
- **January 16, 2019:**ISIS militants detonate a bomb in downtown Manbij. The explosion kills at least 19, four of which are U.S. service members. An unconfirmed number are wounded, including three U.S. service members. Source: [Wall Street Journal](#) [184]
- **December 2018 - January 2019:**On December 19, U.S. President Donald Trump tweets that ISIS has been defeated in Syria and the United States will soon remove its forces from the country. German, French, and British officials respond that ISIS has been pushed back in Syria but not been defeated. On January 16, an explosion in the U.S.-patrolled town of Manbij kills at least 16, including four U.S. citizens. ISIS claims responsibility. Afterward, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence repeats that ISIS "has been defeated." Sources: [Deutsche Welle](#) [185], [Associated Press](#) [186]
- **July 25, 2018:**ISIS militants launch a series of coordinated suicide bombings in Sweida province, southern Syria. The attacks kill more than 200 people. Source: [New York Times](#) [187]
- **July 2018:**In July 2018, ISIS launches a new wave of attacks against HTS and opposition forces in Greater Idlib Province after a series of HTS raids against ISIS in June 2018. On July 6, ISIS claims responsibility for an attack against an HTS checkpoint near Saraqib and for an IED attack against unidentified opposition fighters west of Aleppo City, its first official attack claims in Idlib Province since May 2017. ISIS claims responsibility for three other attacks against HTS and opposition forces from July 6-9. ISIS was likely also responsible for an unclaimed VBIED attack near the Al-Ahrar Mosque in the Muhandisin District of Idlib City on July 6. Source: [Institute for the Study of War](#) [52]
- **May 2018 - December 2018:**On May 1, the U.S.-led coalition begins Operation Roundup to eliminate ISIS's remaining presence in Iraq and Syria. In June, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) launch a ground offensive against ISIS targets in coordination with Coalition and Iraqi airstrikes. By December 2018, ISIS retains only a small foothold in the Syrian town of Baghuz along the Syrian-Iraqi border. Sources: [New York Times](#) [188], [U.S. Central Command](#) [189], [U.S. Central Command](#) [190]
- **April 2, 2018:**Approximately 400 ISIS fighters attack Iranian-backed militias in the Syrian town of Boukamal, killing 11 pro-government fighters. Five ISIS militants are also killed. Source: [Chicago Tribune](#) [191]
- **March 2018 - May 2018:**On March 12, ISIS fighters attack the rebel-held al-Qadam neighborhood of southern Damascus. ISIS reportedly takes control of 25 percent of Qadam. On March 13, the Syrian government evacuates approximately 300 rebel fighters from Damascus to the Idlib province. The rebels turn their remaining territory over to the Syrian government, which takes control of approximately 70 percent of Qadam. ISIS attacks rebels during the evacuation. On March 14, ISIS forces attack Syrian army positions and gain ground in southern Damascus after several days of fighting. At least 62 Syrian army soldiers are killed. The Syrian army sends thousands of reinforcements to southern Damascus in April to force ISIS from Qadam and surrounding areas, including the nearby Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp, which ISIS had occupied since 2015. On May 18, the Syrian government reportedly reaches a truce with the militants. On May 19, the government begins evacuating ISIS fighters in buses under a reported deal for the government to retake full control of southern Damascus, though Syria denies any deal exists. Sources: [Al Masdar News](#) [192], [Al Masdar News](#) [193], [Reuters](#) [194], [Reuters](#) [195], [Al Arabiya](#) [196], [Al Masdar News](#) [197]
- **April 18, 2018:**ISIS attacks pro-Assad regime soldiers in Mayadin, central Syria. The ambush kills at least eight. Source: [Institute for the Study of War](#) [52]
- **January 5, 2018:**ISIS renews its offensive against Syrian rebel group HTS, capturing at least two villages in south-eastern Idlib, Syria. Source: [Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#) [198]
- **December 12, 2017:**ISIS forces launch a new offensive against Syrian, Iranian, and Hezbollah forces in Deir Ez Zor, Syria. ISIS media claims to capture up to eight villages and kill as many as 41 pro-regime fighters. Source: [Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#) [199]

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- **September 2017 - October 2017:**The Syrian army relieves Deir al-Zor and re-extends state control at the Euphrates. In October, the SDF drives ISIS from Raqqa. Source: [Reuters](#) [200]
- **February 25, 2017:**Jabhat Fateh al-Sham militants conduct suicide attacks on two security installations in Syria's government-held city of Homs. The attack kills 50 and injures another 24. Source: [Chatham House](#) [201]
- **October 3, 2016:**ISIS suicide bombers target a Kurdish wedding party in northeast Syria, killing at least 36 people. Source: [CNN](#) [202]
- **September 16, 2016:**A U.S. airstrike targets and kills Wael Adel Salman, a.k.a. Abu Muhammad al-Furqan, ISIS's chief spokesman. Salman was the ISIS minister of information, responsible for overseeing the production of terrorist propaganda videos showing torture and executions. Source: [CNN](#) [203]
- **August 30, 2016:**Coalition forces conduct an airstrike in al Bab, Syria. The missiles target and kill ISIS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani. Source: [U.S. Department of Defense](#) [204]
- **August 2016:**The U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), spearheaded by the Kurdish YPG, take Manbij. Alarmed by the Kurdish advances near its own frontier, Turkey launches an offensive into Syria against both ISIS and the YPG. Enmity between Turkey and the YPG will continue to complicate operations against ISIS in years to come. Source: [Reuters](#) [200]
- **July 27, 2016:**A bombing carried out by ISIS militants kills 44 in the Syrian Kurdish-controlled city of Qamishli. Source: [BBC News](#) [205]
- **April 7, 2016:**ISIS militants kidnap over 300 cement workers from a cement plant near Damascus, Syria. Source: [CNN](#) [206]
- **April 4, 2016:**Airstrikes perpetrated by either Syrian or Russian forces target and kill 20 Nusra front militants, including Abu Firas, the media spokesman for the insurgent group. Source: [Time](#) [207]
- **February 21, 2016:**Multiple attacks in Homs and southern Damascus kill at least 122 and injure scores, according to Syria's state-run SANA news agency. ISIS claims responsibility for the attacks. Source: [CNN](#) [208]
- **September 15, 2015:**Two car bomb attacks kill more than 20 and injure more than 100 others in Syria's northeastern Kurdish city of Hasakah. The local Kurdish forces blame the attack on ISIS. Source: [ARA News](#) [209]
- **August 24, 2015:**ISIS destroys the nearly 2,000-year-old Baalshamin temple in Palmyra. UNESCO calls the destruction of the temple a war crime. Source: [New York Times](#) [210]
- **August 14, 2015:**U.S. officials confirm suspicions that ISIS used a mustard agent on its enemies in Syria. Source: [CNN](#) [211]
- **August 7, 2015:**ISIS captures and holds dozens of Christians in Syria's Homs province. Source: [Wall Street Journal](#) [212]
- **July 4, 2015:**ISIS circulates a video showing insurgents executing 25 Syrian government soldiers in the ancient amphitheater in the city of Palmyra. Sources: [CNN](#) [213], [Al Arabiya](#) [214]
- **June 24, 2015:**ISIS militants destroy two Muslim holy sites in Palmyra—a 500-year-old shrine and a tomb where a descendent of the Prophet Mohammed's cousin was reportedly buried. Source: [CNN](#) [215]
- **May 25, 2015:**ISIS wrests control of the ancient Roman city of Palmyra, in central Syria, from the Syrian army. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, ISIS executed more than 200 Syrians, civilian and military, during the offensive. Source: [CNN](#) [216]
- **May 21, 2015:**ISIS takes control of Palmyra, an ancient Syrian city that is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, it was the last Syria-Iraq border crossing under control of Syrian troops. Sources: [CNN](#) [217], [BBC News](#) [218], [New York Times](#) [219]
- **February 26, 2015:**In the culmination of a multi-day offensive on Assyrian Christian villages in northeastern Syria, ISIS militants kidnap further hostages, bringing the total number of Assyrian Christian hostages to 262. Source: [CNN](#) [220]
- **February 5, 2015:**Jordanian fighter jets carry out airstrikes over Syria, reportedly hitting ISIS training centers as well as arms and ammunition depots in Raqqa. The next day, ISIS claims that the airstrikes killed American hostage Kayla Jean Mueller. ISIS posts a picture of a collapsed building and the terror group claims Mueller is buried in the rubble. Source: [CNN](#) [221]
- **December 17, 2014:**A mass grave containing over 230 bodies is discovered in eastern Syria. The dead are believed to have belonged to al-Sheitaat, a Sunni tribe against ISIS. The deaths bring the number of al-Sheitaats killed by ISIS over 900. Source: [International Business Times](#) [222]
- **December 15, 2014:**ISIS militants capture two key army bases in the northwestern province of Idlib, Syria. The two bases, Wadi Deif and Hamidiyeh, are significant losses for the Syrian army, who had them under its control for more than two years. The battle results in dozens of casualties on each side. Source: [Al Arabiya](#) [223]
- **November 2, 2014:**Leaders from ISIS and its jihadist rival, the Nusra Front, meet in Atareb to discuss joining forces.

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- No formal merger or cooperation between the groups is established, but ISIS reportedly sends fighters to help the Nusra Front's assault on Harakat Hazm, a Western-backed moderate rebel group. Source: [Military Times](#) [224]
- **September 19, 2014 - September 22, 2014:**ISIS advances on the Syrian border town of Kobani and thousands of refugees flee into Turkey.
Source: [Brookings](#) [225]
 - **September 13, 2014:**ISIS posts a video showing the beheading of British aid worker David Haines.
Source: [CNN](#) [226]
 - **September 2, 2014:**ISIS releases video of the beheading of American journalist Steven Sotloff.
Source: [New York Times](#) [227]
 - **August 24, 2014:**ISIS militants seize Taqba airbase in Raqqa, Syria. ISIS now controls the entire Raqqa province. Source: [Guardian](#) [228]
 - **August 19, 2014:**ISIS posts a YouTube video of the beheading of American journalist James Foley.
Source: [Brookings](#) [225]
 - **August 1, 2014 - August 5, 2014:**ISIS militants crucify, behead, and shoot over 700 members of the Shaitat tribe in eastern Syria, in what is one of ISIS's bloodiest advances.
Source: [Washington Post](#) [229]
 - **July 2014:**ISIS takes control of Syria's largest oilfield and seizes a gas field in the Homs Province, storming the facility and killing dozens of workers. Militants conquer a 90-mile stretch of Syrian towns, from Deir Ezzor to the Iraq border. In Mosul, they blow up Jonah's tomb, a holy site dating back to the 8th century B.C. Sources: [CNN](#) [230], [CNN](#) [231]
 - **July 17, 2014:**ISIS storms the Shaer gas field in Palmyra region and kills 270 people.
Source: [CNN](#) [232]
 - **June 21, 2014 - June 29, 2014:**ISIS takes control of Al-Qaim, a town on the border with Syria, as well as three other Iraqi towns. ISIS announces the establishment of a caliphate and rebrands itself as the "Islamic State." They announce the erasure of all state borders and claim Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi the self-declared authority over the world's estimated 1.5 billion Muslims. Sources: [CNN](#) [233], [CNN](#) [234]
 - **May 2014:**American citizen Moner Mohammad Abusalha, who goes by the *nom de guerre* Abu Huraira al-Amriki, reportedly carries out a suicide truck bombing on a mountaintop restaurant in Syria that had been a gathering spot for Syrian soldiers. Also in May, French citizen Mehdi Nemmouche, who reportedly fought in Syria with ISIS, shoots and kills three people at a Jewish museum in Brussels. The attack is the first instance of a European Islamist fighter returning home from the conflict in Syria to commit acts of violence. Sources: [New York Times](#) [235], [New York Times](#) [236]
 - **May 2014:**ISIS kidnaps more than 140 Kurdish schoolboys in Syria, forcing them to take lessons in radical Islamic theology.
Sources: [CNN](#) [237], [The Times](#) [238]
 - **January 2014:**ISIS exploits the power vacuum created when rebels wrested parts of the country's north and east from the Assad government. ISIS pushes out moderate rebels and easily seizes strategic territory. The group pushes into the northeastern Syrian city of Raqqa and consolidates control by the end of January, declaring it the capital of the ISIS emirate. Source: [New York Times](#) [25]
 - **February 3, 2014:**Al-Qaeda's central leadership officially cut ties with ISIS. Rifts between al-Qaeda and ISIS emerged last year when al-Qaeda leader, Ayman al-Zawahri, ordered ISIS's withdrawal from Syria and to leave the insurgency there to be run by the official al-Qaeda affiliate, the Nusra Front. ISIS refuses and its haste to seize resources like oil fields and border crossings brings it into conflict with other rebels, and causes widespread clashes between the sides leaving thousands dead across northern and eastern Syria. Source: [New York Times](#) [239]
 - **January 2014:**ISIS is accused of carrying out mass executions against civilians, prisoners, and other rebel fighters in Aleppo, Idlib, and Raqqa. According to reports, bodies were found handcuffed and blindfolded at a children's hospital used as a base by ISIS. In early January, after ISIS had asserted control over Aleppo for months, opposing Syrian rebel factions drive the group from its headquarters in the city. However, by mid-January, ISIS has reclaimed much of its territory. On January 23, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri releases an audio statement pleading with jihadist factions to stop fighting each other, and to set up an Islamic arbitration court. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reports that during two weeks of intense fighting between rebel groups and ISIS, approximately 1,400 people were killed. After taking control of Syria's oil and gas resources, reports surface in late January that the Nusra Front and ISIS are selling those resources back to the Assad regime. According to one intelligence source, "The regime is paying al-Nusra to protect oil and gas pipelines under al-Nusra's control in the north and east of the country..." Sources: [New York Times](#) [240], [New York Times](#) [241], [New York Times](#) [242], [New York Times](#) [243], [Telegraph](#) [244]
 - **September 2013 - October 2013:**ISIS and a rebel brigade called Northern Storm battle for control of Azaz, a Syrian town strategically located along the Turkish border. In late September, ISIS wrestles control of Azaz from Northern Storm. Source: [New York Times](#) [245]

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- **September 12, 2013:** Ayman al-Zawahiri releases a message the day after the 12th anniversary of the September 11 attacks. He calls on his followers to carry out “a few disparate attacks” against the American homeland and to “bleed America economically.” Part of his message refers to the war in Syria, where he tells Islamist fighters not to cooperate with secular rebel forces. Source: [New York Times](#) [246]
- **August 4, 2013:** Fighters from several different rebel groups attack army positions in the Sheikh Nabhan area of the Latakia countryside. The rebels then entered the Alawite villages of Barouda, Nbeiteh, al-Hamboushieh, Blouta, Abu Makkeh, Beyt Shakouhi, Aramo, Bremseh, Esterbeh, Obeen, and Kharata. Over 190 civilians are killed in the attacks. Source: [BBC News](#) [247]
- **July 22, 2013 - July 23, 2013:** Rebels ambush and seize the northern town of Khan al-Assal. Unconfirmed reports suggest the ambush kills 123 regime forces. Source: [BBC News](#) [248]
- **June 12, 2013:** Rebels attack Hatla village, in eastern Syria. The attack kills dozens of Shia Muslim residents, most of them pro-government fighters. Source: [BBC News](#) [249]
- **June 9, 2013:** Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri issues a letter nullifying the merger between the Nusra Front and ISI, notifying each side where they are to operate. “The seat of the Islamic State in Iraq is in Iraq. The seat of Jabhat al-Nusra for the people of al-Sham, is in Syria.” Source: [Al Jazeera](#) [250]
- **June 2013 - July 2013:** ISIS escalates attacks against members of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in an apparent attempt to take out the FSA’s leadership. ISIS reportedly kills “prominent” FSA commander Kamal Hamami for planning operations without consulting it. The organization also beheads two FSA soldiers and leaves their heads next to a garbage can. Source: [New York Times](#) [251]
- **April 11, 2013:** Baghdadi moves from Iraq to Syria, and claims that ISI merges with the Nusra Front in Syria to become “The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.” However, Nusra Front leader Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani rejects the alliance and declares allegiance to al-Qaeda. Sources: [Wilson Center](#) [252], [Washington Institute](#) [253]
- **February 11, 2013:** Syrian rebels, including battalions from the Nusra Front, take control of the Tabqa Dam, Syria’s largest hydroelectric dam, in Raqqa Province. Source: [New York Times](#) [254]
- **January 15, 2013:** Unidentified militants attack Haswiya village. The attack kills over 100 people. The Syrian government claims that the Nusra Front is responsible for the ambush, supposedly in retaliation against the villagers for supporting the government. Source: [BBC News](#) [255]
- **October 9, 2012:** The Nusra Front claims responsibility for multiple suicide attacks against an air force intelligence branch in Harasta, a suburb of Damascus. The group claims that one suicide bomber detonated a vehicle packed with nine tons of explosives, while another attacker drove an ambulance loaded with explosives to the scene 25 minutes later. Source: [New York Times](#) [256]
- **September 8, 2012:** A suicide bomber from the Nusra Front attacks al-Haya hospital in Aleppo. The group claims that it killed more than 200 military officers and soldiers, while the Syrian government reports that 27 soldiers died and 64 were wounded. Source: [Long War Journal](#) [257]
- **September 2012:** Merges a number of rebel groups under an umbrella called the “Shields of the Revolution,” though it denies formal ties to the Shields. Source: [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#) [258]
- **August 2012:** Brotherhood spokesman Mulham Droubi announces the formation of “armed battalions within Syria whose mission is self-defense and security protection of the wronged.” Brotherhood Comptroller General Riad al-Shaqfeh later denies this claim. Source: [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#) [39]
- **July 19, 2012:** The Nusra Front claims responsibility for kidnapping and executing Syrian television presenter Mohamed al-Saeed. The group warned supporters of the Syrian regime that “...the swords of the mujahideen will cut off their heads and purify the Levant from their obscenity.” On the same date, the Nusra Front claims that it conducted a suicide bombing on a security post in Ma’arat al-Nu’man, killing 60 Syrian soldiers. Sources: [Huffington Post](#) [259], [Defend Democracy](#) [260]
- **July 12, 2012:** Armed terrorist groups ambush Tremseh, a village in Hama province. The ambush was suspected to target army defectors and activists. Due to conflicting reports, the ambush kills anywhere from 39-220 people. Source: [BBC News](#) [255]
- **June 1, 2012:** The Nusra Front carries out multiple attacks on Syrian military targets. This is in retaliation for the Syrian government’s massacre in Houla. The attacks include a suicide attack on the al Nayrab Camp in Idlib, as well as ambush and IED attacks on military units responding to the attack at al Nayrab. Source: [Long War Journal](#) [261]
- **April 24, 2012:** The Nusra Front claims responsibility for a suicide bombing attack on the Iranian Cultural Consulate in Damascus.

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- According to the group, one of its security battalions attached explosives to a Syrian army vehicle and detonated them when it arrived at the Consulate. Source: [Chicago Tribune](#) [262]
- **March 12, 2012:** Armed militants attack the Karm el-Zeytoun neighborhood of Homs. The attack kills over 45 people. Syrian State news agencies blame “armed terrorist gangs” for the killings, saying the militants kidnapped residents, killed them and then filmed the bodies to discredit Syrian forces. Source: [BBC News](#) [255]
 - **February 10, 2012:** Several car bombs explode minutes apart from each other at a military security headquarters and police compound in Aleppo, Syria, killing 28 people and wounding more than 200. The Nusra Front claims responsibility for the attack. Sources: [New York Times](#) [263], [Al Arabiya](#) [264]
 - **January 24, 2012:** The Nusra Front, al-Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate, officially announces its formation with a video statement, claiming it is “bringing the law of Allah back to His land.” The group carries out numerous attacks against diplomatic, military, and civilian targets inside Syria. Sources: [Quilliam Foundation](#) [91], [Chicago Tribune](#) [262], [New York Times](#) [265]
 - **January 6, 2012:** The Syrian government reported that a suicide bomber detonated himself in the Midan neighborhood in Damascus, killing 26 and wounding dozens. Again, the opposition accused the Syrian government of perpetrating the attacks to bolster its narrative that al-Qaeda was gaining influence among the opposition. The Nusra Front eventually claimed responsibility for the attack. Sources: [New York Times](#) [266], [Al Arabiya](#) [264]
 - **2012:** Former members of the Muslim Brotherhood’s Fighting Vanguard, Luay al-Zubi and Abu Basir al-Tartusi, return to their hometowns in Syria, allegedly in order to revive the Vanguard’s old militant networks. Source: [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#) [39]
 - **December 23, 2011:** Two car bombs explode near Syria’s intelligence agencies in Damascus. The explosions kill at least 44 people. Al-Qaeda is suspected to be responsible for the attack. Source: [New York Times](#) [267]
 - **October 2011:** The Brotherhood begins to provide funds and arms to Syrian rebels and revolutionaries seeking to oppose the Assad regime, using donations from individual members and from the governments of Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Some of these weapons fall into the hands of extremists. Source: [Washington Post](#) [268]
 - **2011:** After Syria’s crisis begins, Islamic State in Iraq’s leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi sends operatives to set up a Syrian subsidiary. Source: [Reuters](#) [200]
 - **May 2010:** The United States renews sanctions against Syria, claiming that it supports terrorist groups, seeks weapons of mass destruction and has provided Lebanon’s Hezbollah with Scud missiles in violation of U.N. resolutions. Source: [Foreign Affairs](#) [22]
 - **April 2001:** The Muslim Brotherhood announces it will resume political activity, 20 years after its leaders were forced to flee. Source: [BBC News](#) [269]
 - **1990:** In 1990, Iraq invades Kuwait and Syria joins the U.S.-led coalition against Iraq. In October of 1991, Syria participates in the Middle East peace conference in Madrid and holds talks with Israel that flounder over the Golan Heights issue. Source: [BBC News](#) [269]
 - **February 1982:** The Muslim Brotherhood instigates an uprising in the city of Hama which is suppressed by the Syrian army. Tens of thousands of civilians are killed. Source: [BBC News](#) [269]
 - **November 29, 1981:** A car bomb explodes in the Azbakiya neighborhood of Damascus, killing approximately 200 people. The Lebanese group Front for the Liberation of Lebanon from Foreigners claims responsibility, but the Syrian government blames the Brotherhood. Sources: [NPR](#) [270], [New York Times](#) [271]
 - **December 1980:** The Brotherhood officially partners with its violent offshoot, the Fighting Vanguard. Source: [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#) [39]
 - **June 26, 1980:** Brotherhood members attempt to assassinate Syrian President Hafez al-Assad using grenades and machine guns. They fail, and a government crackdown on the group results in many Brotherhood deaths. Source: [Middle East Voices](#) [43]
 - **June 1979:** The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria launches an attack during the Islamic uprising, killing 83 cadets at Aleppo Artillery School. Source: *The Syrian Muslim Brothers and the Syrian-Iranian Relationship* by Yvette Talhamy
 - **1976:** The Fighting Vanguard launches a campaign to assassinate top Syrian officials in revenge for Brotherhood militant Mawan Hadid’s death. Source: [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#) [39]

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Domestic Counter-Extremism

Syria has had a long history as a repressive state. Repressive policies became standard following the passing of a law declaring the country was in a state of emergency in 1963. The law gave the government nearly unlimited authority to restrict individual freedoms and to investigate and detain suspects when national security and public safety were deemed to be at risk. The state of emergency was enacted following the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, with then-President Hafez al-Assad declaring the state of emergency as a way to stymie the Brotherhood's influence and opposition to the central regime. Following the outbreak of the 2011 mass protests, the government of Bashar al-Assad, son to Hafez al-Assad, has taken a hardline approach when dealing with dissenters—using violent tactics against civilians, such as bombing raids, and chemical attacks—as a way to respond to supposed threats of terrorism. (Sources: [Human Rights Watch](#) [272], [U.S. Department of State](#) [273])

However, the Assad regime has allowed al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups to develop terrorist networks inside Syria as well as facilitated the transport of both weapons and fighters to Iraq. The Syrian government has also been involved in terrorist financing. The Assad regime has purchased oil from ISIS, providing revenue for the group. Given that the majority of business transactions are conducted in cash or are conducted through regional *hawala* (informal money transfer establishments) networks, there are concerns that Syrian government officials and businesses are complicit in terrorist financial schemes that utilize these financial frameworks. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#) [107])

Since the beginning of the civil war, the central regime has presented itself as a victim of terrorism. In the government's effort to neutralize opposition, the public is often caught in the crossfire. It was revealed that in April of 2017, the Syrian government launched a chemical attack against the residents of the opposition held town of Khan Sheikhoun. Over 80 people were killed following the attack. Although Syrian officials denied involvement in the operation, claiming the state no longer possessed chemical weapons following a 2013 deal, the United Nations and Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons's (OPCW) Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) gathered an "extensive body of information" that determined that the Syrian air force was responsible for the attack. (Sources: [BBC News](#) [274], [U.S. Department of State](#) [107], [BBC News](#) [275], [Al Jazeera](#) [276])

Counter-Terrorism Law

Following the start of the 2011 protests, the Regional Command of the Baath Party commissioned a law to reportedly ensure "homeland security and citizens' dignity." On April 2012, Assad issued Decree 161 ending the law that had placed Syria in a state of emergency since 1963. He also issued Decree 53/2012 that abolished the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC) and Decree 54/2012 that regulated the "right of peaceful demonstration" in Syria. Following these decrees, the Counter-Terrorism Law (CTL) was issued on June 28, 2012. On July 26, 2012, Assad also issued Decree 22 which stated that a court would be established to address terrorism cases. However, all the "legal" mechanisms within the CTC were created to suppress and stifle any opposition and to ensure the regime's dominance in all matters of the state. Although the CTC was modeled after the SSSC, the CTC has proven to be far more severe in its sentencing of detainees. The CTC often defers to vague legal texts which does not differentiate between the severities of acts carried out by detainees. According to the current interpretation of the CTL, actors accused of belonging to a terrorist organization could be tried similarly to peaceful demonstrators. Although CTC jurisdiction covers crimes of terrorism and crimes referred to it by the CTC attorney general, there are no clear standards behind referring a detainee. These arbitrary referrals further perpetuate the severity in which the government responds to its opposition as it is reported that all those sent to the CTC have participated in activities linked to the revolution. Furthermore, the CTC does not have to oblige to regular trial and due process which further demonstrates that the CTC works in the favor of the government and at the opposition of the Syrian public. Given the lack of due process in the Syrian court system, in cases where ISIS members are tried, Syrian courts heavily rely on pre-trial torture and post-trial mass executions. (Sources: [Violations Documentation Center in Syria](#) [277], [Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy](#) [278], [Just Security](#) [279])

Rojava

Given the severity of political and social instability in 2012, the inhabitants of northeastern Syria attempted a level of democratic self-governance. Under this direction, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (NES) or Rojava, was established to provide de facto governance in the region. Rojava features a constitution and legal system that features

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female judges, a ban on death penalties and extradition to countries with the death penalty, and creative restorative justice. However, Rojava does not have access to more sophisticated technology needed to prove more substantive crimes like rape, murder, and slavery that require evidence than confirmation of membership in a terrorist organization. Rojava has been proven to be successful in trying ISIS suspects, a trait that the central justice system has not figured out itself, however conviction for international crimes that capture the full extent of ISIS brutality, like war crimes and genocide, are impractical within that system. Although Rojava has proven to be a proactive domestic legal mechanism, the Syrian government considers the Rojava to be an illegal judiciary which has led to warrants for the arrest of Rojavian judges and staff. International recognition is also limited as the Rojava is not considered an independent judiciary and cannot engage in substantial foreign relations. (Sources: [Just Security](#) [279], [Financial Times](#) [280])

Law Enforcement

Syria's central government has not controlled large portions of land for almost a decade which has necessitated the decentralization of law enforcement from the national level to the local level. Syria's government has not controlled large swathes of land for almost a decade which has necessitated the decentralization of law enforcement from the national level to the local level. According to the Omran Center for Strategic Studies' 2016 survey of 105 local councils in opposition-held territory, they found that 57 percent of local councils were formed through "a general agreement on a local level," and 38 percent were formed through elections, with the lack of security and legal expertise cited as the major reasons why more elections were not held. The majority of these councils were created in 2012 and 2013 and go through restructuring on average once a year. (Sources: [Middle East Institute](#) [281], [International Review](#) [282])

Free Syria Police

Through Operation Euphrates Shield, Turkey allocated significant resources and humanitarian assistance to local Syrian governments. One outcome of this initiative was the creation of the Free Syria Police (FSP) in 2012. Funded by six western countries, the FSP was created with the goal of creating security and stability in north Aleppo, an area where local rebel groups have contributed to ongoing conflict and lawlessness. The FSP did not have any relation to the police operating in other rebel-controlled territories like Idlib, Daraa, or other parts of the Aleppo countryside, but instead reported to the local councils operating in northern Aleppo. Most of the recruits were from refugee camps in Turkey, though some were also former rebel fighters. The police recruits received specialty training as well as equipment from Turkish forces and were provided with uniforms, weapons, and police cars. On January 16, 2019, the FSP ceased operations following an HTS takeover of Idlib province. As part of an HTS-rebel agreement to halt the fighting, all areas previously held by rebels not directly backed by Turkey fell under the governance of the militants' so-called National Salvation Government. According to local media, HTS-related Islamic police were deployed in areas where Free Syrian Police disbanded. (Sources: [International Review](#) [283], [Middle East Eye](#) [284])

U.S. Military Operations

By June 2014, the security situation in Iraq had deteriorated with the Iraqi cities of Mosul and Tikrit falling in rapid succession to ISIS aggressors. On October 17, 2014, the U.S. Department of Defense formally established Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) in order to formalize ongoing military actions against the rising threat posed by ISIS in Iraq and Syria. (Source: [U.S. Department of Defense](#) [285])

Proposals for U.S. military action in Syria began in August 2013 after the Assad regime reportedly used chemical weapons on civilian populations, however, they were unable to pass through U.S. Congress. In September 2014, then-U.S. President Barack Obama ordered the first airstrikes in Syria, specifically targeting ISIS-controlled territory. The international coalition included the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, and Jordan. In late 2015 the first American ground troops entered Syria—initially 50, growing to the current official total of about 2,000. They recruited, organized, and advised thousands of Syrian Kurdish and Arab fighters, dubbed the Syrian Democratic Forces, and pushed ISIS out of most of its strongholds. As of December 2018, the U.S.-led coalition has launched airstrikes on at least 17,000 locations in Syria since the start of the operation. Thousands of ISIS fighters have been killed or captured, but U.S. military officials say there are still as many as 2,000 insurgents still in the Middle Euphrates River Valley, and a number of others who have escaped to various locations around the country. In 2018, U.S. President Donald Trump announced that he would withdraw American forces from Syria. American forces have begun leaving Syria in early 2019, however, approximately 1,000 troops

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remain. (Sources: [BBC News](#) [274], [The Atlantic](#) [286], [The Pew Research Center](#) [287], [New York Times](#) [288], [Military Times](#) [289])

On October 7, 2019, Trump declared the withdrawal of U.S. troops from northern Syria and the end of U.S. protection for Kurdish fighters. The decision generated a rare rebuke from Republican lawmakers, including Senator Lindsey Graham, who strongly objected to the abandonment of the Kurds and forfeiting critical ground in Syria—an opportunity that U.S. adversaries, including ISIS, will undoubtedly capitalize upon. On November 25, 2019, it was announced that United States troops have resumed large-scale counterterrorism missions against ISIS in northern Syria. American-backed operations against ISIS fighters in the area had effectively ground to a halt despite warnings from Defense Intelligence Agency analysts that ISIS militants were regrouping and still posed a threat even after their leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was killed during an American raid on October 26, 2019. Additionally, several hundred other U.S. troops, arrived in Syria from Iraq and Kuwait under a subsequent order from Trump to protect Syria's eastern oil fields from ISIS, as well as from the Syrian government and its Russian partners. (Source: [New York Times](#) [160])

On January 5, 2020, the U.S.-led military coalition fighting ISIS announced that it would temporarily halt its counter-ISIS missions to focus on protecting Iraqi bases from Iranian-backed militias. Following the death of Qasem Soleimani, leader of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp's Quds Force (IRGC-QF), on January 2, 2020 by a U.S. drone strike, Major General Hossein Dehghan, the military adviser to Iran's Supreme leader, stated that Tehran's response will "for sure be military." Dehghan further claimed that Iran would retaliate directly against U.S. "military sites." However, on January 25, 2020, U.S. troops picked up the pace of counterterrorism missions in Syria. General Frank McKenzie, the U.S Middle East commander, has stated that it is uncertain how long American troops will remain in Syria, but maintains that American forces will stay long enough to weaken ISIS while also providing the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) with enough mentorship and training to become an enduring domestic security unit before U.S. withdrawal. Additionally, the Trump administration hopes that maintaining American forces on the ground—particularly at bases such as Green Village, an outpost near a major Syrian oil field, and Conoco, a site that houses massive storage drums—will help to protect oil infrastructure that will help fund the SDF's ongoing operations. (Sources: [Al Jazeera](#) [4], [Reuters](#) [5], [CNN](#) [6], [New York Times](#) [7], [CNN](#) [8], [Washington Post](#) [9], [Military.Com](#) [10])

Turkish Military Operations

Turkey has conducted three military operations throughout the Syrian civil war—Operation Euphrates Shield, which lasted from August 2016 to March 2017 and Operation Olive Branch, which began on January 2018 and remains ongoing. The Turkish Armed Force's primary objectives during these respective operations were to seize and hold critical terrain for border security and create buffer zones inside Syria to prevent ISIS from encroaching northwest of the Euphrates River, and to oust the YPG from Afrin in northwestern Syria. At the initial phase of Operation Euphrates Shield, Ankara emphasized that the operation would be limited both in time and space to maintain border security and confront the Islamic State as an act of self-defense against terrorism. (Source: [Washington Institute](#) [290])

On January 20, 2018, Ankara launched Operation Olive Branch into the YPG-controlled Afrin region in northwestern Syria. The purpose of the operation, according to the release, was "to neutralize the terrorists belonging to the PKK-affiliated YPG and the Islamic State in the region of Afrin in northwestern Syria, in order to provide security and stability along Turkey's borders as well as in the Afrin region." Through Operation Olive Branch, Ankara aimed to reposition international actors vis-à-vis the YPG, casting the group as a serious threat to Turkey's security. Turkey views any Kurdish entity as part of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), an internationally designated terrorist organization that has been in conflict with the Turkish government for decades. (Source: [Washington Institute](#) [290])

On October 9, 2019, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced the start of Operation Peace Spring. The campaign launched a cross-border offensive into northeastern Syria using airstrikes, artillery bombardments, and a ground invasion against Kurdish forces. Operation Peace Spring follows the abrupt announcement made by U.S. President Donald Trump on October 7, 2019 that declared the withdrawal of U.S. troops from northern Syria and the end of U.S. protection for Kurdish fighters. The decision by Trump to draw back on U.S. presence in northeastern Syria gave the Turkish government the green light to attack the Kurds. The Kurdish forces, who are lightly armed compared to the Turkish military, have fought alongside Americans for years. The group, long considered one of the United States' most reliable partners in Syria, has played a key strategic role in the campaign against ISIS in the region. The White House added Turkey would now be responsible for all captured ISIS fighters who are currently being held by U.S.-backed Kurdish forces

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in northern Syria. (Sources: [The Soufan Group](#) [291], [Council on Foreign Relations](#) [292], [The Hill](#) [293], [Washington Post](#) [294], [CNN](#) [295])

Following the announcement of U.S. withdrawal in October 2019, security in the north has rapidly deteriorated. Without additional support, Syrian Kurds are unable to adequately guard detention camps in al-Hol, with reports claiming that as many as 100 ISIS prisoners have escaped and that at least 400 others were released by or managed to evade YPG forces. Additionally, on November 17, 2019, Turkey's Defense Ministry claimed that the YPG released over 800 ISIS prisoners in Tal Abayad. Additionally, one prison in the border city of Qamishli, was hit by Turkish mortars on October 13, 2019, and five ISIS suspects fled in the aftermath. Al-Hol, which lies outside the border strip towards the Iraqi border, holds thousands of ISIS prisoners who, if not adequately guarded, could escape and reactivate ISIS sleeper cells in the area. SDF guards have been trying to hold their positions at the prisons, but it is unclear how long they can remain. However, on November 25, 2019, U.S. troops resumed large-scale counterterrorism operations against ISIS in northern Syria, under the auspice of safeguarding Syrian oil fields from falling into ISIS's hands. General Kenneth McKenzie, the head of U.S. Central Command, even claimed that there is no foreseeable "end date" for complete U.S. withdrawal from Syria. (Sources: [ABC News](#) [296], [Anadolu Agency](#) [297], [New York Times](#) [298], [Military Times](#) [299])

Russian Military Operations

Moscow has intervened in Syria's war in several ways since 2011. Moscow consistently sought to prevent Western military intervention to oust Assad, but following ISIS' increasing strength and eventual capture of Palmyra in the first half of 2015, Russian President Vladimir Putin approved the start of an air campaign to support the Syrian regime. Moscow justified the campaign as a way to undermine ISIS and prevent the terror threat from spreading to Russia. The Russian military has claimed that the air campaign would exclusively take down terrorist targets, however, there are reports that civilian areas have been hit. Russian airstrikes and missile strikes were decisive in late 2016 during the battle for eastern Aleppo and in early 2018 during in Eastern Ghouta. U.N. human rights investigators have accused the Syrian government and Russian forces of committing war crimes as they have conducted campaigns targeting medical facilities, schools, markets and farmland. (Sources: [BBC News](#) [274], [The Atlantic](#) [286], [RAND](#) [300], [Reuters](#) [301])

On March 5, 2020, Turkey and Russia—who back opposing sides in Syria's war—agreed to halt fighting in Syria's Idlib. Recently, the Russian-backed Syrian government forces attempted to retake Idlib, which prompted Turkey to back rebels seeking to oust President Bashar al-Assad. The ceasefire also includes an agreement to establish a security corridor with joint patrols. Idlib, the last stronghold of Syrian rebels, has been the scene of intense fighting as Russian-backed forces have tried to expel the rebels. The operation has resulted in hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees fleeing towards the border with Turkey, which President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan claims is already at capacity to properly control and support migrant flows. On March 13, Turkey and Russia officially agreed to start joint patrols in Idlib, with the new measures to take effect on March 15. (Source: [New York Times](#) [302], [Reuters](#) [303], [CNN](#) [304], [Defense Post](#) [305])

International Counter-Extremism

The U.S. has designated Syria as a state sponsor of terrorism since 1979. Reasons for the designation include the country's former occupation of Lebanon from 1990 to 2005, pursuing weapons of mass destruction and missile programs, and policies in supporting terrorism—such as allowing U.S.-listed terrorist groups like Hamas, Hezbollah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command, to maintain headquarters in Damascus—and undermining international efforts towards stabilizing Iraq. Under the Syria Accountability Act, Syria is subjected to export sanctions and ineligibility to receive or purchase most forms of U.S. aid or U.S. military equipment. Following the mass protests of 2011, subsequent Executive Orders have been issued due to ongoing violence and human rights abuses at the hands of the regime. Additionally, Syria denies the designation as a state sponsor of terrorism as it condones Hamas and Hezbollah's operations on Syrian soil as legitimate resistance movements towards Israeli occupation of Arab territory. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#) [306], [Council on Foreign Relations](#) [307])

Combating Terrorist Financing

Syria is a member of the Middle East and North Africa Financial Action Task Force, a regional organization that aims to

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combat terrorist financing and money laundering. (Source: [FATF](#) [308])

The United States maintains comprehensive sanctions on Syria that broadly restrict the ability of U.S. persons to engage in transactional dealings involving Syria. Syria has been subject to U.S. economic sanctions since 2004 under the Syria Accountability Act, which prohibits or restricts the export and re-export of most U.S. products to Syria. Sanctions in August 2008 prohibited the export of U.S. services to Syria and banned U.S. persons from involvement in the Syrian petroleum sector, including a prohibition on importing Syrian petroleum products. In response to regime brutality against peaceful protesters beginning in 2011, the U.S. government imposed additional sanctions beginning in April 2011, designating those complicit in human rights abuses or supporting the Assad regime. In April and May 2012, the U.S. government authorized additional sanctions for serious human rights abuse against the Syrian people and for efforts and activities undertaken to evade sanctions. (Source: [U.S. Department of State](#) [306])

International Criminal Court

The International Criminal Court lacks jurisdiction to try ISIS members in Syria as Syria is not a party to the Rome Statute, a statute which led to the establishment of the International Criminal Court. However, Sweden has supported the idea of an international tribunal to try ISIS members to rectify the jurisdiction challenges in Syria and Iraq. (Source: [Just Security](#) [279])

International criminal justice has yet to adequately compensate victims and survivors of terror acts. Two important initiatives were initiated in 2014—the Commission for International Justice and Accountability (CIJA) and the International Impartial and Independent Mechanism for Syria (IIIM). CIJA uses on-the-ground Syrian investigators to collect evidence of international crimes carried out by ISIS and the Assad regime. Rather than waiting for a tribunal to be set up, CIJA initiates investigations concerning mass atrocities and offers either domestic or international courts the evidence it has gathered. Set up by the U.N. General Assembly, IIIM gathers, collates and preserves existing evidence of mass atrocities, eventually hoping to use the evidence in appropriate courts. Currently, evidence acquired by CIJA and IIIM is primarily used in war crime trials in Europe. (Source: [Washington Post](#) [309])

Public Opinion

In March 2018 Gallup reported that over half of Syrians (52 percent) believe Assad will win the conflict—which was a 10 percent increase from the previous year. According to a 2018 poll conducted by ORB International, over 57 percent of Syrians believe that the West has played a negative role in supporting Syrian people to restore their rights. Furthermore, more than 94 percent of Syrians are reported to reject ISIS, with an additional 78 percent rejecting HTS. (Sources: [Gallup International](#) [310], [ORB International](#) [311])

Additionally, Syrians living in opposition-controlled areas are more likely to say their access to basic services has worsened in comparison to those living in areas under Kurdish or regime control:

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	access to food		access to electricity		access to medicine		access to drinking water		access to fuel	
	Better	Worse	Better	Worse	Better	Worse	Better	Worse	Better	Worse
2017	36	30	15	57	30	38	30	36	17	59
2018	34	22	28	41	32	26	36	21	30	37
Controlled by Opposition										
2017	18	36	9	59	15	50	15	37	10	68
2018	22	40	11	67	18	46	22	37	13	64
Controlled by Assad										
2017	55	26	12	65	46	25	45	37	13	58
2018	37	10	32	32	36	11	40	10	35	26
Controlled by Kurds/SDF										
2017	52	25	39	38	41	35	49	28	38	42
2018	48	26	47	24	46	34	52	23	48	21

(Source: [ORB International](#) [312])

Although Syrians living in areas controlled by Assad and the Kurds reported improved access to food, medicine, and drinking water, they reported deteriorating conditions to electricity and fuel. Given worsening access to basic aid in opposition-held Syria, ORB International reports that citizens choose to trust non-government organizations and local relief organizations to provide aid rather than the United Nations or the Assad regime. (Source: [ORB International](#) [312])

Overall, Syrians do not see an immediate end to the conflict as 26 percent of respondents believe the conflict will end in 1-2 years, with an additional 22 percent believing it will be more than three years. (Source: [ORB International](#) [312])